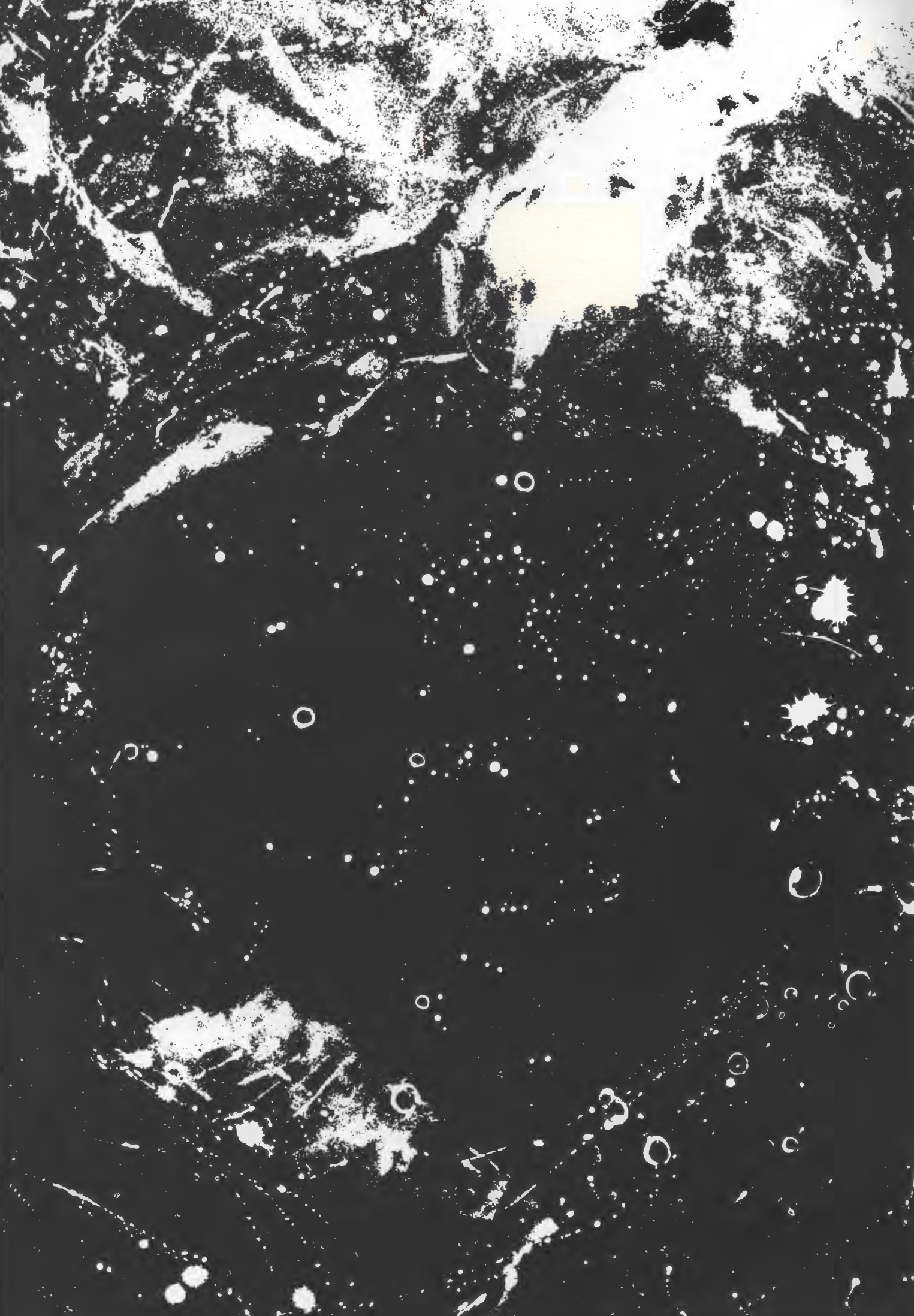


HEADS ABOVE WATER

Annette Bezor





■ H E A D S A B O V E W A T E R ■

A n n e t t e B e z o r

University of Tasmania
Fine Arts Gallery
University Centre Sandy Bay
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Cover:
Head Above Water II



"The world of woman touches the world of men, moreover, at so many points that to paint woman is to paint us all, from the cradle to the grave. It will be the characteristic mark of the art of this century that it has approached contemporary life through woman. Woman really forms the transition between the painting of the past and the painting of the future."⁽¹⁾
Camille Lemonnier

These sentiments were written at a time when the painting of women had become the obsessive pre-occupation of late nineteenth century Symbolist art and literature, when for the male painter and poet alike the primary subject was the enchanting lure of the eternally feminine. "The image of woman was at the very center of his aesthetic and moral principles as well as the crux of his deepest psychological motivations."⁽²⁾

It is a fitting artistic politic for Annette Bezor, a late twentieth century 'fin-de-siecle feminist' painter (strange

bedfellows indeed) to turn her attentions to the female oriented aesthetics of the Symbolist period for an interpretation of a contemporary feminine allegory.

Her *Heads Above Water* series of paintings reflects and refers to a lengthy western tradition of male artists who have painted the female nude as a bather or swimmer. Such images of the female in art have always functioned as ambiguous symbols, primarily sensual and formally and hieratically sublimated into an acceptable and relatively tasteful 'Ideal' of Beauty. This constitutes a noble and therefore philosophically significant subject for the traditionally voyeuristic male connoisseur-aesthete, who was hence considered the most informed and apt interpreter of the possible meaning of the 'historical' female body in art.

Prior to the nineteenth century the most conspicuous and memorably 'intimate' examples of the bather in western painting have been the various sixteenth and seventeenth century depictions of *Susannah Being Observed by the Elders* (a good smoking room subject) and the more

private paintings of Rembrandt's mistress at her bath. In the nineteenth century a combination of Idealist interpretations of the impassive female subject with photographic academic naturalism reached massive proportions of publicly voyeuristic titillation, obsessively and neurotically veering towards its Freudian destiny. It is within such a context that the English painter John Everett Millais' drowning nineteenth century 'ecstasy of St Theresa', in the form of a pre-Raphaelite and unfortunate *Ophelia* (1851) appears. There is also, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's (not forgetting Lord Leighton's abluting beauties), *A Favorite Custom*, where the classical Roman architecture of the sunken baths is merely the fetishistic 'drop' for a refined and aristocratic "what the Butler saw" (see the accompanying gallery folder for reproductions of these works).

However it is in the work of the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt (1890's-1907) that more direct antecedents for Annette Bezor's paintings can be traced. Klimt's mystical and erotic female figures that swim and simultaneously remain

suspended in rhythmic streams and seas of fluid, portrayed his sexual and human cosmic conceptions of fate, specifically symbolized by his recurring use of the image of the female sexual and ageing cycle (see also Edvard Munch's *Dance of Life* and his various madonna/temptresses). The streaming winding sheaths of floating hair, the sinuous decorative linear rhythms of his swimmers⁽³⁾ that suggest erotic abandon and interpenetration are to an extent, in Bezor's pastels and paintings. Present in particular is the sexually confronting abandon and the slightly sinister explosion of breathless seduction and unconcealed lustful pleasure in the face emerging from the deep and watery regions of the pastels.

In the series of the four large paintings, Bezor has produced her most succinct and complete metaphoric work so far. The female figures (each is a portrait of a friend, including her own self-portrait shown three times) undergo their journey of relationship and trial, essentially alone, placed by the artist in a substance that could not be more redolent with possible meaning as a narrative symbol



for a drama pertaining to art, sexuality and the self. Again, it is important to look at sources and previous conceptions of such a subject, as it is to these that the result and meaning of Bezor's work must eventually be related and from which they should be distinguished.

When Klimt's panels of swimming, suspended figures were returned by the University of Vienna because of their 'pornographic' content, other such reactions followed and Klimt, in disgust at the rejection, retired to the country to paint his famous birches, sunflowers and the sea. The two works I am specifically considering in relation to Bezor's placement and immersion of the 'fertile' image of the female swimmer are Klimt's *Island in the Attersee* (c1901) and *The Water at Attersee* (c1902) (see gallery folder for reproductions). In these paintings Klimt filled the full canvas from bottom to virtual top with the surface reflections of water (he made the studies from a boat three hundred yards from shore). It is a dizzying effect, close, threatening, all pervading; the depth and all its implications just beyond the

flat and rising decorative surface. These paintings of water are too psychological to be 'impressionist', too singular in concentration and therefore too narrow a conception for an 'impressionist' world view. Alessandra Comini argues that Nature for Klimt, was, like Woman, literally a void to fill, an ocean to leap into⁽⁴⁾. At this point, a case for Bezor's challenge to male Symbolist stereotyping might commence. By her placing of six female portrait heads onto such a symbolic morass she asserts what I would call her 'feminist darity', effected through contrast of style. The emphasis is on female identity/identification: specific women, their faces clear though their bodies submerged, are in question (made questionable as the property of history). Interestingly, these 'portrait heads' also appear as 'decapitations', the naturalistic style severing them. The reference here is of course again Symbolist - Klimt's fashion for the neck choker and the full concentration on the 'open' female face set in a Whistlerian opaque mist of white lace ruffle, diffusing into an equally cloudlike background (see Klimt's *Portrait of Hermine Gallia*



and *Portrait of Serena Lederer* 1899, Whistler's *Symphony in White No 111* - see gallery folder for reproductions).

The other image that comes strongly to mind is Max Klinger's *Drowning Man* (see gallery folder), male but terrifying as we are invited to witness between the meeting of sky and sea, the moment of an abandoned man opening his mouth and commencing to drown; the swirling and eddying sea rushing into his body and being in order to extinguish it. The man's eyes watch his fate in resignation - this is pure Symbolist allegory and Bezor's female swimmers are similarly threatened but without the voyeuristic morbidity.

In the first of the four paintings, seven women cluster in a central vortex, heads held above the water with difficulty; there is temerity and the mouths are tightly shut. The water is dark, murky and foreboding, their skin is deadly in pallor and the chilling blue suggests a cold temperature and eclipsed light. The only concession to 'life' is a self-conscious, feminine, rouge-painted cheek. In the second painting, action

has been initiated, the vortex is broken and the women disperse, splashing, the faces are somewhat more relaxed. There is now revealed some evidence of the female sex but it is obscured by the ungainliness of the struggle to move. The faces seem both interested and yet distant, no gazes meet; the concentration required to stay afloat is critical. One figure appears to be sinking. In the third painting, the women are all submerged, there are no faces to register fear or hesitation, in the act of submerging there is a speed and corresponding direction for the swimmers. Light seems to emerge from within the painting, the cold anxiety of the previous two pictures is gone and there is now more evidence of female shape and natural sensuality. The figures seem to have gained mobility as their hair has come loose. In the final painting the ordeal of symbolic submergence has been, mostly survived. One figure is lost, missing an inevitable casualty. Their faces and gazes now address each other, the isolation of the ordeal by water turns into a communal activity, drama and anxiety have



been transformed into play while the artist, the figure in the lower right, does not appear convinced and makes ready to move on but is confined by the picture frame to her symbolic painterly ordeal. Once again there is Symbolist art historical precedence for Bezor's women locked together in rhythmic psychological relationships that manifest alienation. Ferdinand Hodler's *Day II* (1904-6), a painting of five naked women seated in a semi-circle, arms raised in dramatic pantomime gestures as they symbolically enact the passage of the female from a withdrawing and concealed personal to an 'open' medium awaiting sexual encounter. Arnold Böcklin's mermaids also vacillate between sexual anxiety at the hands of salty sea-satyr and the joys of bottoms-up nubile freedom. Finally, Fernand Khnopff's *Memories* (1899) (see gallery folder for reproductions of all the above) is a painting crucial to Bezor's conceptions. It depicts seven Victorian maidens pausing from a game of tennis; the tensions they experience are explicit in their postures and the manner in which they hold their racquets.

They are distracted, no gazes link, isolated in their grouping, enmeshed in the story and concealing trappings of their voluminous Victorian dresses, they are impassive modern Sphinxes certainly capable of sexual evil, whilst there is no question of their innocence.

What then are the implications for Bezor, the late twentieth century 'fin-de-siècle feminist' painter, who has turned her attentions to the female oriented aesthetics of the Symbolist period? She, like other contemporary artists who acknowledge the 'post-modern' predicament and who see themselves as working within it, confronts the issues of 'appropriation', originality and the author, the subject and the self and, finally, the satisfactory or otherwise acceptance of the art work as an aesthetic token or cypher within the various theoretical regulations that have emerged for the reading of visual practices. If Bezor is working from a strongly feminist perception, then the above concerns take on a different value within the machinations of a disputing 'avant-garde'.



Over and above Bezor's use of Symbolist subject, compositional references and their diverse methods of representation, there emerges a powerful, confronting, struggling and free female awareness, riding like a Botticelli Venus with her own outboard motor on an allegorical sea - traditionally the drowning substance of female identity. She has chosen to work within conceptually difficult confines, for the aesthetic movement, English and continental, meant manacles for women while it proved sexually and libidinally liberating for male artists. Bezor achieves a perverse switch on this situation while engaging in a dissembling practice which at a superficial level might bring down the indignant wrath of male and female artist, historian and critic alike.

In Bezor's work, female 'identity', 'awareness' is pushed literally up onto the surface and into being. Her concentration on the female face, its subtlety, its recording of each inflection of mood and thought is as the mirror to the woman; it is her constant as a material being. It is true that for the male Symbolist artists, particularly Khnopff,

there was also a heightened awareness of the emotional possibilities of the face as the 'mirror of the soul'⁽⁵⁾. Camille Maudair⁽⁶⁾ clarified the Symbolist concept of the image of woman in an imaginary dialogue between Hedda Gabler (Ibsen) and Clarisse Gabry (Paul Adam) two figureheads for the symbolist portrayal of women which is worth quoting at length.

"We are forms, Clarisse, pretexts. Our beauties create conceptions in men... Those among us who know that the curvature of their eyelids or the corner of their mouth signify thoughts for men, those who have studied in the mirror enough to know in detail that which the physical aspect inspires in the interior movements, they are born courtesans, they have no need to think. They have only to show themselves, with their spirit fully empty; the thought of their beauty will be provided by men... We are two moderns, little Clarisse, two images of modernism..."⁽⁷⁾



Khnopff, as a painter of such women, focused particularly upon the eyes and mouth, declaring "The expression of the mouth is truest; there it is impossible to dissimulate."⁸

The decisive element in this rococo fantasy of mirrors is that the mirroring activity in Bezor's work is not drawn across the face of a watching male and then onto his canvas; there is no male suggested, indicated or even invited into these pictures. The female is looking at herself for her own pleasure as a reflection of her own experience – she is her own voyeur and as such drains the act of the symbolist male's need for mystery and the overlaying of sex with religion. It is irrelevant that a thousand males might see these paintings, what is important is who they were done for. What a moral shock for those who have accepted the 'history of Arts' tenet that voyeurism was the exclusive domain of the all knowing and encompassing male eye. In the wresting of control of her image for herself, is the feminist challenge here. Is her self-gaze a threat to the male

gaze? If there is male or female discomfort in the viewing of this exhibition then there should clearly be no confusing of it as a matter of taste or a squeamish fall back on to 'good' art versus 'bad' art. These things go deep and Bezor has probably hit the history of art in the softest and most vulnerable part of its belly... the domination and control of art, and, through art, of woman. Break the one and you have broken the other. However, as in the late nineteenth century, the prospects of such a power struggle are dim, and, as with Bezor, the best we can do is keep our heads above water.

As for her implication in the 'post-modernist' pastichists/parodists versus the old 'avant-gardism', Bezor's work happily gives that debate the coup de grace. Donald Kuspit in a recent article⁹ attacks what he sees as the singular 'narcissism' of the 'new appropriators'.¹⁰ According to him, Bezor would fall into this category, considering her re-creation of Symbolism without its original (dubious) Idealist (the idealizing moralists of the subject in art as it is tied to style and form are gasping for



air). Kuspit might apply to her brand of 'narcissism' the view that "Like the consuming world, neo-art in general over-objectifies the 'original' art it appropriates - appropriation is inherently over-objectification - thus destroying it."⁽¹¹⁾ What could be better for a feminist when appropriating the form and subject of the Symbolists? In 'destroying' it all that is destroyed is its fatal and 'fatalizing' use of woman. As for his view that today's artist copies old art in order to give it 'at least second hand authority'⁽¹²⁾, this again is undermined by Bezor. Her work represents no purified nostalgia, nor is it just a 'seductive set of signs'⁽¹³⁾. The 'nostalgia' or as I prefer to call it, empathy, is for real women as they exist and have existed, mirror fetish and all, within the dominating matrices; the 'seductive' in her work is as sexual pleasure not as moral misdemeanour, as Kuspit (who seems more and more to display male Symbolist phobias) suggests the implications of seduction to be. Admittedly, in many instances I would agree with Kuspit when he attacks 'post-modernist' appropriations for "simply piling intellectual appropriations

apon aesthetic appropriations anally mouthing what is fashionable to understand and fetishize, as if treating it as though it was created in a vacuum was a sign of truthfulness."⁽¹⁴⁾ In Bezor's case the matter is quickly sorted and clarified when a feminist perspective is applied. Herein lies the unique political role of feminist appropriation within 'post-modernism'.

Perhaps one could take Lemonnier's statement "Woman really forms the transition between the painting of the past and the painting of the future" a little further by saying that Woman, and especially the woman artist, cannot proceed into her own future unless she tampers with the painting of the past.

Elizabeth Gertsakis
London, June 1986



Heads Above Water II

Born in Adelaide 1950

Studied

- 1974-77 South Australian School of Art, Diploma of Fine Art (painting)
- 1978 Co-founder Round Space Artists' Collective
- 1981 Teacher in Design/Drawing, Centre for the Performing Arts, Adelaide

Selected Individual Exhibitions

- 1983 Round Space Gallery, Adelaide
- 1985 South Australian School of Art Gallery
- 1986 Fine Arts Gallery, University of Tasmania

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1977 Young Artists Exhibition, Festival Centre, Adelaide
- 1978 Round Space Members, Union Gallery, University of Adelaide
- 1980 *Micro Show*, Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide
- Tarot Card*, Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide
- The Real Thing*, Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide
- Maude Vizard Wholohan Art Prize Exhibition, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

- 1981 John McCaughey Memorial Art Prize Exhibition, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

- 1983 John McCaughey Memorial Art Prize Exhibition, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1984 *Private Symbol, Social Metaphor*, 5th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Awards

- 1977 John Christie Wright Memorial Prize
- 1980 Co-winner of Maude Vizard Wholohan Prize

Represented

Art Gallery of South Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Artbank and private collections.



- 1 **Head Above Water I**
Pastel on paper
61.5 x 83 cms
- 2 **Head Above Water II**
Pastel and gouache on paper
123.5 x 90 cms
- 3 **Head Above Water III**
Pastel and gouache on paper
90 x 118 cms
- 4 **Head Above Water IV**
Pastel and gouache on paper
90 x 118 cms

- 5 **Heads Above Water I**
Oil on canvas
100 x 136 cms
- 6 **Heads Above Water II**
Oil on canvas
100 x 260 cms
- 7 **Heads Above Water III**
Oil on canvas
100 x 244 cms
- 8 **Heads Above Water IV**
Oil on canvas
100 x 210 cms

(Pastels with frame)

(Oils without frame)



Heads Above Water III

- 1 quoted by Khnopff in *The Studio* Vol 39, Dec 1906 p 219 (Howe).
- 2 Howe, J, Chap 8 'Love & Death: Virgin Muses, Fatal Women, & Androgynes' *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*. UMI Research '82.
- 3 (See gallery folder for Klimt's *Moving Waters* 1898, *Fischblut Hygieia* detail from the *Medicine* mural, *Water Serpents* 1904-7, *Goldfish* 1901-2, *Philosophy from Medicine* mural and his *Danae*.
- 4 Comini, A, *Gustave Klimt* Thames & Hudson, London, 1975.
- 5 Howe, J, Chap 6 'The Mirror' in *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff*. UMI Research Press. Michigan, '82.
- 6 Ibid Howe. Chap 8 'Love & Death: Virgin Muses, Fatal Women and Androgynes'.
- 7 Published in *Mercure de France* Vol 22. April 1897 (Howe).
- 8 Published in *The Studio* Vol 57, 1912 (Howe).
- 10 op. cit. pg 29.
- 11 op. cit.
- 12 op. cit.
- 13 op. cit.
- 14 op. cit.

I am indebted to Howe's chapter 'Love and Death: Virgin Muses Fatal Women, and Androgynes' from his publication *The Symbolist Art of Fernand Khnopff* UMI Research Press, Michigan, 1982 for his insight and ideas relating to the view of woman in late 19thC symbolist painting.

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